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let's
talk
about
dates

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LET'S TALK ABOUT DATES

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Dates are a good source of energy in the form of easily digested sugar. They are eaten fresh or cured. There are three general classes of dates—soft, firm and bread dates. Most of the dates produced in the Lower Rio Grande Valley are soft dates. They have a soft texture caused by high moisture content and they sour easily unless dried, canned or frozen. Methods given in this leaflet are primarily for soft dates.

GATHERING AND PREPARING DATES

Picking

Dates for curing should be fully mature before picking, as indicated by complete absence of green color, and the ripening of a few fruits. The entire bunch can be cut at this time.

Sorting

Sort the fruit carefully. Discard all fruit showing mold, skin damage or "souring."

Cleaning

Wash the dates and spread on a surface for drying. An electric fan will hasten drying.

Ripening

Pack the dates in paper bags or cartons and place in the home freezer or freezer locker plant. They will freeze solid in about 15 hours. Remove frozen dates and spread out to thaw and dry. This will require about 2 hours with the aid of an electric fan. The dates will look translucent, which is characteristic of fruit beginning to ripen. Arrange them in a warm place to go through the ripening process. This can be in an oven held at 95 to 100 degrees F. for 18 to 24 hours. The time required to ripen the dates differs with the variety, temperature and moisture content of the fruit and the surround-

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ing air. Remove the fruit to room temperature and allow to cool. Dates may be frozen, canned or dried if the quantity is more than can be eaten immediately.

METHODS OF PRESERVING DATES

Freezing

Pack clean, ripened dates by layers in moisture-vapor-proof containers. Store at 0 degrees F. in a home freezer or locker plant.

Canning

Place cleaned, pitted dates in hot clean jars and close. Process in a hot water bath for 20 minutes in pint jars; 25 minutes in quart jars or process in pressure canner at 10 pounds pressure for 15 minutes. Complete the seal if closures are not self-sealing. Cool, label and store in a cool, dry, dark place.

Drying

Dates may be dried in a sun-dryer, electric dryer or in the oven. Spread the cleaned and pitted dates in a layer on wire or slatted trays and proceed according to type dryer to be used.

It takes 1 to 3 days to cure the dates in the sun-dryer, depending upon temperature and moisture in the air. About 24 to 36 hours are required in the electric dryer or oven. If the oven is used, leave the door partly open. Have a thermometer on the tray. Gradually increase the temperature to 140 degrees F. The same temperature would be used for an electric dryer. Follow the manufacturer's directions for using the electric dryer. When the dates are dry, they should be firm, not sticky.

The dried dates may be packed in hot, clean jars and sealed, or put in cellophane bags and heat sealed. Label and store in a cool, dry, dark place.

Partially Drying and Vacuum Packing

Heating kills insect eggs and bacteria that may be on the fruit. It also reduces the moisture content of the fruit.

Spread the cleaned fruit on racks or trays, one layer thick. The trays should have wire bottoms or slats to allow for circulation of heat through the fruit. Preheat the oven to 200 degrees F.; then turn off heat. Place the trays in the oven and allow to cool. The time required will vary with kind of oven and variety of date. The date should be dry and firm, but not sticky. If this consistency is not reached by the first heating, put the trays back into the oven which has been preheated. This second heating usually removes extra moisture, leaving the fruit in desired condition. "Soft" varieties of dates probably will require this second treatment. Pack the dates into hot, clean jars. Do not add syrup or liquid. Use self-seal lids. Place jars in the pressure cooker. Bring the pressure up to 5 pounds for 10 minutes; then release the steam suddenly to pull any remaining moisture out of the jars. Remove from cooker to cool. Label and store in a cool, dry, dark place.

Date Paste

Clean and pit the dates. Put in top of double boiler. Let cook for about 30 minutes. Stir often to allow even cooking and blending of the peel and meat. The mixture will not boil because it is very thick. Pack the hot mixture into hot, clean jars. Close jars and process in a water bath for 10 minutes. Remove jars. Complete seal if closures are not self-sealing. Cool, label and store in a cool, dry, dark place.

Pickled Dates

Use fresh dates. Slit lengthwise; remove the stone and place half a pecan meat in each date. Pack the dates into clean jars. Pour syrup over dates after bringing it to a boil.

8 cups sugar
3 cups white wine vinegar
1 cup water
1 teaspoon oil of cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon oil of cloves

Boil 3 minutes.

Close jars. Process dates in pressure cooker 10 minutes at 5 pounds pressure, or 30 minutes in boiling water bath. Remove jars; complete seal if

closures are not self-sealing. Cool, label and store in a cool, dry, dark place.

Date-Nut Marshmallow Whip

1 cup chopped dates
(packed)
 $\frac{1}{4}$ pound marshmallows
1 $\frac{1}{4}$ cups heavy cream
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon grated lemon
rind
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup lemon juice
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped nuts

Cook dates in enough water to cover until very soft and water has evaporated. Mash. Melt marshmallows in top of double boiler with $\frac{1}{4}$ cup cream. Add lemon rind and juice, salt, nuts and dates; cool.

Whip remaining cream until stiff. Fold in date mixture. Spoon into serving dishes and garnish with whipped cream and nut halves, if desired. Serves 6 to 8.

Date-Nut Loaf

1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups boiling water
1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups chopped dates
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup brown sugar (packed)
1 tablespoon soft shortening
1 egg
2 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups flour
1 teaspoon soda
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
1 cup chopped nuts

Pour water over dates. Cool. Mix together brown sugar, shortening and egg. Stir in the dates and water. Sift together the flour, soda and salt. Stir into date mixture only until all flour is dampened. Blend nuts in lightly. Pour into well greased loaf pan. Let stand 20 minutes before baking. Bake 60 to 70 minutes at 350 degrees F.

REFERENCE

Morris, J. S. and G. H. Godfrey, A New Method for Ripening Dates, Texas Agr. Exp. Sta. P.R. 1139, 1948.

